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INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEADWD/DA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO IMMEDIATE 1014

C O N F I D E N T I A L SOFIA 000044

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/28/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: BULGARIA: NEXT STEPS IN THE DEFENSE PARTNERSHIP

Classified By: AMB McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Defense Minister Tsonev's principal message for his Feb 5 meeting with Secretary Gates is that Bulgaria's strategic future lies in a deepened partnership with the United States and he wants to implement programs now that will ensure that future. In concrete terms, he will talk about additional contributions to the NATO effort in Afghanistan, expansion of joint training at Bulgarian bases, and (still unspecified) assistance on the closure of Guantanamo. He has a positive story to tell about Bulgarian defense reform, with an all volunteer force that is one fifth of its Cold War size, though its effectiveness is still constrained by dead wood at the top and woefully outdated equipment throughout the ranks. Tsonev is convinced that a key step in the reform and upgrade of Bulgaria's military is the acquisition of F-16's which will form the basis of a long-term institutional relationship with significant political impact. Russian adventurism in Georgia and the energy crisis and their blatant predatory manipulations here have reinforced Tsonev's convictions. While not an intellectual powerhouse, Tsonev is looking to do the right thing and we should help. Locking in Bulgaria now will establish valuable long-term commitments and create a headwind for the new government that will emerge after summer's parliamentary elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Tsonev is the first senior Bulgarian official to meet with our new Administration. He looks to set an irreversible course for whatever new government emerges later this year. Bulgaria has come through on everything we have asked militarily; it stuck it out in Iraq, quadrupled forces in Afghanistan; supported MAP for Ukraine and Georgia; and NATO membership for Croatia, Albania and Macedonia. Our joint training facilities and exercises are building steam. He will be eager to hear our gameplan for the NATO Summit and dealing with Russia. Bulgaria is inclined to stay in the NATO mainstream; hamstrung by energy dependence on Russia, it will be leery of poking Moscow in the eye. But there is ample scope to pull Bulgaria closer to us.

Afghanistan

¶3. (C) Bulgaria currently has 467 troops in Afghanistan, (the bulk in RC-South) up from just 80 in 2006. Both the President and Prime Minister understand Afghanistan's strategic importance and are open to additional deployments. Though Bulgaria has limited means, the government comes through when we present specific, targeted requests. With the withdrawal of its 153-soldier contingent from Iraq, we believe Bulgaria has capacity for two or three more OMLT's and a Role Two military medical facility. Longer term, we are pushing them to consolidate forces (now spread across three regional commands) to a single area and add additional

troops to form a battalion-sized force. We are also advocating for expanded civilian assistance in the form of engineering, medical, or agricultural teams.

Joint Exercises

14. (C) We have pursued an increasingly ambitious schedule of joint exercises at our strategically located shared facilities. These bases hosted our largest-ever training event last year with 900 U.S. and 300 Bulgarian land forces, plus several Air force deployments. In 2009 we are planning the first-ever USMC exercise with approximately 600 marines and our first-ever multi-lateral exercise (with 200 of UK soldiers) in the fall. Both the President and PM are open to larger and more frequent U.S. deployments. The humanitarian and community affairs projects that accompany the deployments are a huge hit, and we can use more of them as we drive home our strategic message.

Fighters

15. (C) Tsonev desperately wants to upgrade Bulgaria's crippled Air Force, now dependent on Russian doctrine, spares, and logistics. He has fixed on used F-16's and will probe for the newest models and best package. Getting a signed Letter of Acceptance before Bulgaria heads to parliamentary elections this summer will lock them into a generational relationship with us.

16. (C) Comment: Russian actions during the natural gas cutoff disturbed many Bulgarian leaders. Tsonev privately confided to the Ambassador that he is also deeply concerned about Russia's corrupting influence. A clear message on U.S. plans to increase troop levels in Afghanistan and a request for Bulgaria to follow suit, will spur action. Tsonev will seize on our strategic vision -- NATO, Afghanistan, joint training and military modernization. He is determined to achieve results and accelerate bilateral cooperation.
McEldowney